



# The Weekly Wrap Up

January 20, 2006

From Viola Miller, Tennessee's Commissioner for  
The Department of Children's Services

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## Twelve and Twenty Four

OK, here's the deal: Do we or do we not believe that it is not in a child's best interest to be in state custody for one minute longer than is absolutely, positively necessary? I do believe that with my whole heart. Every child deserves a permanent home with a loving adult or adults. The state has no business raising anyone's children. As wonderful as many of our foster parents are, they are temporary placements for children.

Children have an entirely different sense of time than do we. For three-year-olds, one year is a third of their lives. Every time we move a child, we create trauma and pain that can often last a lifetime. We owe it to children to take as few risks with their lives as possible.

Parents are mostly adults, although some of those teenage parents don't really fall in that category. If they plan to raise their children, they must understand that time is everything. They need to believe that we want more than anything for them to raise their own children. **But, 12 months for a goal of reunification is it -- that's all -- and our kids parents need to understand that from the very beginning.**

Intensive, front-end, strengths-based family supports and wrap-around services will provide the very best possibility that families can keep their children safe and nurtured. Our work with families must from the beginning take a long-term view that asks the question, "What will it take for your family to be intact and safe for the well-being of these children?" Once the family and their partners have agreed on an answer, everyone should understand that we have an absolute maximum of 12 months to make it work, really work, not "work a 'little bit' and we'll give more chances."

As my father always said, "fish or cut bait." And I think that notion captures our time-limited approach to reunification. And if we can't reunify in that time frame, it's time to move to another permanent goal, most often adoption.

Adoption should never take more than 24 months. Right now, we're averaging somewhere around 22 months AFTER the TPR. That will not do. Our children deserve better and we can do better.

Excellent first placements that can and will serve as real concurrent placements are ideal. Whether this first placement is with a relative or a stranger, a concurrent family is committed to the child for both possibilities, short term and permanently.

What will it take for us to get to the point where no child spends more than twelve months in custody with a goal of reunification and twenty-four months with a goal of adoption? Write and let me know what you think. We all know that it's the right thing to do. Now how do we make certain that it happens. -- VIOLA MILLER

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## FLEETFEET

Please know that beginning immediately all AWOL's will be reported to me by the Internal Affairs Operation Fleetfeet group. For our youths' safety and security as well as for the safety of the community, we must stop our very high rate of AWOL's. We have taken a number of steps to add tools to this process in Davidson (our highest AWOL area) and will take those statewide as needed. We will also very soon have access to additional short-term secure placements.

**What I need for all of you to do right now is two things:**

1. Review your own behavior to identify anyway you can better prevent AWOL's. Please make this issue a priority for your CQI meetings. Review youth management while transporting and or while they are in our offices. Can you take more careful actions that will prevent our children from running?
2. I am asking each RA to hold an emergency Cross Functional Team meeting within the next 5 days to discuss this issue with Private Providers and develop a plan to significantly reduce AWOL's. Please send your meeting minutes to me within the next 10 days.

Please let me know what help you need from Central Office. Make Suzanne White aware of any agencies that seem to have an unusually high rate of AWOL's.

Working together, we can better protect our youth and our communities. Thank you for your immediate and thoughtful attention to this extremely important issue and let me hear from you.

VPM

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## AP: DCS Meth Cases Plunge

6th August 2005

Chattanooga, TN (AP) - With Tennessee restricting sales of medications that can be used to make methamphetamine, records show a drastic drop in children taken into state custody from parents caught making or using the illegal drug.

Making meth creates toxic, sickening vapors. The state has taken hundreds of children from parents who exposed them to so-called labs that can also cause deaths and burn injuries.

Enforcement of a state restriction that put Sudafed and other tablets containing pseudoephedrine behind pharmacy counters started April 1st.

Tennessee Department of Children's Services records provided to the Associated Press show meth-related investigations led to state custody placements of at least 268 children in 2005. That compares to a department estimate of 750 meth-related child custody placements in 2004.

A state Child Protective Services case manager in Putnam County, Betsy Dunn, said she and co-workers "have certainly seen a decrease in the number of children coming into state custody due to meth labs."

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## USATODAY:

### [Underground Network Moves Children From Home to Home](#)

By Wendy Koch, USA TODAY

TRENTON, Tenn. — At the end of a long tree-lined driveway, amid 18 acres that include a greenhouse and gazebo, sits a historic plantation home where, a state indictment says, children were beaten and forced to sleep in a totally enclosed baby crib.

Tennessee is charging the owners, Debra and Tom Schmitz, with abusing some of their 18 children, most of them disabled. The state says Debra Schmitz threw a knife at one child, held two children underwater for punishment and forced five to dig holes in the ground that would be their graves.

The couple, whose trial is scheduled to begin Jan. 30, are also charged with child trafficking for moving a girl to Arizona without permission from state child-welfare officials.

The Schmitzes strongly deny the charges, which stemmed from complaints by the children and nurses who worked in their house. "The children were our entire life. They were our everything," Debra Schmitz says.

What they don't deny, and what the trial may help spotlight, is their role in a largely unknown aspect of the nation's beleaguered child-welfare system: an underground network of families that takes in children others do not want. Some families do so legally, and eventually adopt the children, but others may violate child-welfare laws by failing to notify authorities, according to interviews by USA TODAY with families,

officials and child-welfare experts. (**Related story:** [No state fully compliant with welfare](#))

. . . [Story continues on USATODAY website](#)

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### [Jackson Sun: Give DCS The Help and Facilities It Needs](#)

JACKSON, Jan. 15 -- The once-beleaguered Tennessee Department of Children's Services is back in the news, this time for allowing too many juvenile offenders in its custody to escape back onto the streets. But this time, the state must bear some of the blame. Tennessee simply does not have enough secured facilities to accommodate DCS and juvenile courts' needs. If DCS is to do its job, the state must provide adequate facilities.

DCS has largely been out of the news since Commissioner Viola Miller took over early in the Bredesen administration. She came to the job with a vast background of experience and solid determination to make the department as efficient and effective as possible. But even someone of Miller's determination and energy cannot perform miracles. . . (continued on Jackson Sun site)